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ABSTRACT

This paper, which includes a lengthy literature review, reports on a study undertaken to determine the attitudes of preservice teachers (N=1,347) towards censorship. Data were collected using a Likert style survey instrument to sample subjects' attitudes toward the unimpeded flow of information in a variety of circumstances. Results generally agreed with findings reported in previous research, i.e., there is a propensity among the American people to favor the free flow of information while objecting to censorship. However, a significant majority of subjects in one or more subgroups within the sample, characterized by gender, race, age, and grade level interest, favored the restriction of the free flow of information in some areas such as magazines with sexually explicit words and/or pictures; words considered offensive to Christians; and descriptions of how to commit criminal acts. Recommendations included a suggestion that teacher educators be encouraged to study aspects of censorship, including their own biases, and foster awareness among their students of issues relating to the free flow of information. Two tables display data on the percentage of respondents within the total sample favoring the free flow of information and the percentage favoring a free flow of information by respondent characteristics. Contains 14 references. (LL)

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Attitudes of Students in Education Classes Toward Censorship

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Attitudes of Students in Education Classes toward Censorship

Abstract

Attitudes toward censorship among 1,347 undergraduate students enrolled in classes designed for students either majoring, minoring, or otherwise interested in teaching were examined. The focus of the study was to answer the following research question: To what degree do individuals likely to become classroom teachers favor censoring the flow of information? To answer this question, a 34-item Likert style scale was used to collect data based on a four-point response scale (Strongly Agree; Agree; Disagree; Strongly Disagree). Results generally agreed with findings reported in earlier studies demonstrating a propensity among the American populace in favor of permitting free flow of information while objecting to censorship. On the other hand, a significant majority of subjects or subjects in one or more subgroups within the sample reported favoring restricting free flow of information concerning: 1. words considered offensive to Christians, 2. information about aid to the Contras

in Nicaragua, 3. magazines with sexually explicit words and/or pictures, 4. racist political groups, 5. slang with sexual referents, 6. sex role stereotypes, 7. flag burning, and 8. descriptions of how to commit criminal acts.

Analysis of data yielded the conclusion that subjects demonstrated strong support for free flow of information in some areas while demonstrating a desire to restrict flow of information in other areas. Recommendations included a suggestion encouraging teacher educators to study aspects of censorship, including their own biases, and foster awareness among their students of issues related to restricting free flow of information.

The Congress shall make no law "abridging the freedom of speech, or the press." So states Amendment I to the Constitution of the United States of America. However, interpretation varies greatly concerning not only the meaning of the words themselves but the intent of the original authors.

Efforts to curtail free flow of information are numerous and emotionally charged. Naylor (1986) extensively reviewed literature, both academic and in the popular press, finding efforts to censor printed materials spreading like "prairie fire" (p.616). Busha (1982) presented an annotated bibliography on nearly 100 articles published mainly in the seventies dealing with numerous efforts from a variety of sources to censor material.

Opponents of limitations on the free flow of information are quick to cite examples of drastic censorship measures taken in societies where freedom of speech was lost or severely curtailed. Most compelling of recent revelations are those of Andrei Sakharov (1990) who described in his memoirs how in what was then the Soviet Union "it was forbidden to publish

information about crimes, alcoholism, health conditions, education, the water supp ..." (p.47) and even seemingly innocuous information such as movie and theater attendance. In a similar vein, Jastrzebski (1993) described the everpresent and stifling censorship pervading communist Poland and the valiant efforts of writers and publishers to express alternative views.

Americans, and most likely people everywhere, endorse the concept of free flow of information and decry censorship. Fields (1986) published results indicating support of 84% of a random sample of 1000 Americans for freedom to read any material not judged illegal. However, Fields did not report how material might be judged "illegal." Consequently, respondents might have interpreted "illegal" in a variety of ways, e.g., interpretations consistent with their own beliefs. Further, Fields reported data demonstrating support of unlimited freedom to procure reading material from 74% of subjects classified as "born again" (p.24) Christians and likely members of what Field classified as "right-wing groups" (p.24).

Bundy and Stakem (1982) analyzed data from 350 responses to a survey concerning attitudes toward intellectual freedom among librarians in the United States. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority (94%) agreed with the following statement: "a chief commitment of the professional librarian should be intellectual freedom for everyone" (p.585). However, support for free flow of information softened on some issues. For example, the statement: "public libraries should carry literature put out by the KKK and the Nazi Party" (p.586) was agreed with by 50%, opposed by 25%, with the remainder not expressing an opinion. Bundy and Stakem cited librarian's reluctance to permit library use for distributing or making propaganda available as reasons for opposing the statement regarding KKK and/or Nazi materials. The researchers, Bundy and Stakem, presented respondents with dichotomous choices, leaving no option to express degree of agreement or disagreement with statements presented. Overall analysis of findings left the researchers confident concerning librarians support for the principle of intellectual freedom. However, Bundy

and Stakem reported not finding an enthusiastic support for a broadly based commitment to free flow of information. Analysis of responses demonstrated to the researchers the lack of a consistent philosophical base concerning free flow of information among many librarians.

People for the American Way (1988) documented more than 500 attempts to restrict free flow of information in the five year period from 1982-1987. Nearly all the incidents concerned censorship issues related to public schools while the most frequently raised objection by would-be censors involved conditions perceived as promoting "secular humanism" (p.10). People for the American Way reported a censor's success rate of 37% in either banning outright or restricting use of materials designated by them as objectionable. This comprehensive report stressed the power of organized "far right groups" (p.16) and persons aligned closely with them in promoting censorship.

While emphasis in the data gathered by People for the American Way concerned specific efforts to curtail information, White (1986) used data from four General

Social Surveys (GSS) sponsored by the National Science Foundation to determine attitudes toward restricting information flow among the general population. The surveys White used were conducted in 1976, 1977, 1980, and 1982 yielding an overall total of about 6,000 respondents. Subjects were asked if they believed books advocating (1) atheism, (2) communism, (3) homosexuality, (4) militarism, or (5) racism should be removed from the libraries. Responses ranged from 38% through 43% favoring the removal of material. White found southerners, conservative Christians, African-Americans, people in rural areas, older citizens, and undereducated people disproportionately favoring censorship. Most notable in White's data, is the inverse ratio concerning formal schooling and attitudes toward censorship. A clear majority of respondents with less than high school education favored censorship in all five categories cited above while percentages for respondents with graduate school experience ranged around 10% favoring censorship. White suggested that those favoring censorship tended to have less exposure to diverse opinion. However,

overall analysis led White to conclude: "The American people as a whole do not support censorship of library books" (p.38).

While most studies appear to emphasize efforts to censor promoted by organizations classified as "far right" and/or conservative groups, Burress (1986) also addressed the issue of "censorship by the left" (p.116). Burress determined that censorship efforts from the right are much more pervasive than those from the left; however, he suggested that censorship of left leaning groups is nonetheless quite vocal and effective. Burress cited a desire to eliminate "racism and sexism from children's literature" (p.125) as the primary focus for censorship among groups generally thought of as left leaning.

Censors often cite seemingly high-minded reasons for restricting information. In this light, Gifford and Cohen (1989) found stringent censorship of information flow in the Union of South Africa defended as a means to prevent the spread of violence and also, in the words of then Foreign Minister, R.F. Botha, to

end the "vicious and venomous coverage by foreign TV crews" (p.4).

Like Burress, Thompson, Chaffee, Oshagan (1990), found much ambivalence among individuals considered "liberal" concerning censorship of pornography. While 65% of their sample of 105 randomly selected adults in the Madison, Wisconsin area supported protection of pornography as a freedom of speech issue, a strong majority of both men and women agreed strongly with the contention that "violent pornography violates women's civil rights" (79). Consequently, the researchers concluded, many individuals who perceive themselves as strong advocates of freedom of speech oppose censorship of nonviolent pornography while supporting restriction of violent pornography as a civil rights issue rather than as a censorship issue.

Rogers (1955) studied the attitudes of nearly 700 undergraduate education majors concerning attitudes toward censorship of newspaper reports. Subjects were presented with eight hypothetical incidents and responded to each item as presented in a Likert format. The highest score on Rogers scale is eight, indicating

complete agreement with all items favoring freedom of information. Tabulation of responses produced an overall mean of 4.53 leading Shaw and Wright (1967) in their later analysis of Rogers' data to conclude that "a large portion of the sample did not hold intense attitudes toward the topic in question" (p. 288). Further, the sample was limited to students in state-supported colleges for white students in Texas. Consequently, Rogers study appears to have limited value for comparative purposes but nevertheless provides an interesting perspective. Subjects in Rogers' study appear to have some characteristics at least remotely resembling their latter day counterparts. Supporting this contention is evidence reported by White (1986), cited earlier, describing rural, southern, conservative Christians as somewhat likely to favor restricting materials perceived by them as offensive.

Review of a vast array of materials concerning censorship suggests commitment of academics and the general populace at an intellectual level supporting freedom of information flow. On the other hand, many,

if not most, individuals appear to harbor serious doubts concerning free flow of information they personally find offensive. This study was undertaken to determine the degree of support for unimpeded flow of information among college students likely to become the classroom teachers of the mid-nineties and beyond.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 1,347 undergraduate students in 14 four year colleges in various geographic locations throughout the United States. Schools were randomly selected within predetermined geographic areas to ensure diversity. All subjects were enrolled in courses designed for students either planning to earn teaching certification or otherwise interested in teaching. School size ranged from a large state flagship university to a small historically black college. An effort was also made to obtain a sample containing representative proportions of African-American and Hispanic subjects. Despite efforts to obtain a representative number of Hispanic

subjects, so few (n=27) identified themselves as Hispanic that a separate designation could not be made for Hispanics. Consequently, the 27 subjects were dropped from the study.

Instrument

Data were collected using a 34 item Likert style survey instrument to sample subjects' attitudes toward censorship in a variety of circumstances. Individual items are presented in Table 1. Subjects were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with each of the items on the scale. Response categories were: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. Items immediately followed by two asterisks (**) are worded so that disagreement with the content of the statement indicates a favorable attitude toward unimpeded free flow of information. For example, since two asterisks follow Item 1, disagreement with the contents of item 1 indicates a positive attitude toward unimpeded flow of information.

The face validity of the instrument was established by submitting the scale to eight

authorities in the area of teacher education and library science. Suggestions from this group were considered when editing and/or removing items from the scale. A field test was undertaken with the instrument in two schools representative of the schools in the larger sample. Use of the instrument with the sample of 117 subjects produced an alpha coefficient of .74, indicating an adequate level of reliability.

Results

Data analysis using Chi-square tests yielded response distributions significantly different from chance (<.05) for all 34 items on the Attitude Scale when the sample was taken as a single whole group. For the whole group (n=1,347), responses on 22 (65%) of the items favored free flow of information while the respondents on the remainder of the items favored restricting information flow. Table 1 presents the content of each item in the Attitude Scale and the disposition of the entire sample relative to free flow of information for each item. For instance, if 35% of

the respondents designated either "agree" or "strongly agree" as their response on an item favoring free flow information, the entry on this table would be .35. On the other hand, if 35% of the respondents indicated agreement on an item favoring the restriction of information flow (censorship) the entry would be .65 (i.e. 100% - 35%) since 65% of the respondents evidently approved of permitting access to the information.

Results suggested that a significant majority of respondents favored restricting freeflow of information concerning the use of words offensive to Christians (Item 20), information about aid to the Contras in Nicaragua (Item 21), sexually explicit and/or pornographic materials (Items 4, 7, 16, 33), racist political organizations (Items 6 & 25), sex role stereotypes (Item 29), flag burning (Item 30), offensive pictures (Item 14), and methods for committing criminal acts (Item 10). As mentioned earlier, items where disagreement with the statement demonstrates support for free flow of information are followed by two asterisks (**). However, on the

original instrument no such designations were presented.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 2 presents data comparing responses of male and female respondents; white and African-American respondents; those under age 30 and those over age 30; and grade level of interest relative to possible future teaching. For example, responses of males and females differ significantly ($p.<.05$) on item 4, with males being much less likely than females to favor punishing publishers of pornographic materials. On this same item, there is also a significant difference in attitudes relative to punishing publishers of pornography between those demonstrating more interest in teaching in the higher grades. On the other hand, there appears to be no significant differences between the races or age groups on this issue. A more detailed description follows the table.

Insert Table 2 about here

Gender

Chi-square tests yielded significant differences in proportions of male and female respondents favoring free flow of information. However, in nine of the 13 items, the majority of males and the majority of females agreed on either favoring or disapproving unrestricted flow of information. For example, while there is a significant difference in the proportions of males and females (93% and 82% respectively) favoring the availability of books by Karl Marx in school libraries, both groups apparently oppose censoring books in this instance.

On items 4, 14, 17, and 33, however, analysis of data produced significant differences between the sexes in responses as well as differences in majorities. Specifically, a substantial majority of males (62%) were opposed censoring pornography (item 4) while only 31% of females demonstrated opposition to censoring pornography. Likewise, a majority of males (53%)

opposed banning depictions of mutilated bodies on record album covers (item 14) while only 36% of the females opposed banning such material. Analysis of data from item 33, demonstrates more tolerance for the idea of libraries purchasing materials using slang to describe sexual acts among males (57%) than from their female counterparts (43%). On the other hand, males demonstrated much less tolerance (41%) than females (63%) concerning making information available to youngsters presenting homosexuality as an acceptable identity (item 17).

Race

Comparison of African-American and white respondents yielded significant differences concerning free flow of information in 17 of the 34 scale items. On the other hand, analysis of data produced differences in majorities for only one item, with 64% of whites and 48% of African-Americans supporting the right to publish a cartoon featuring a character joking about having AIDS (item 32). Noteworthy is the almost identical level of responses as both African-Americans

and whites overwhelmingly rejected the idea of permitting advertisements for the Ku Klux Klan (item 6) and American Nazi party (item 25) in school newspapers.

Age

Data analysis produced significant differences in proportions of respondents under 30 years of age and those 30 and older concerning free flow of information on 15 of the 34 scale items. Of the 15 where differences were found, only two produced differences in majorities. Specifically, younger respondents demonstrated support for having school administrators restrict students and teachers from using words offensive to Christians while a majority of older respondents indicated disapproval of such an admonition (item 20). A minority of respondents (45%) under age 30 supported restricting information concerning classification of information on aid provided to the Contras in Nicaragua while a majority of older respondents (55%) supported classification of this information (item 21).

Grade Level Interest

Data analysis revealed significant differences in proportions of respondents interested in teaching in the earlier grades (K-6) and those interested in careers in the upper grades (7-12) on five of the scale items (4, 16, 24, 25, and 30). However, on all of the items, the majority of each group were in agreement on whether or not information should be restricted.

Discussion

Undergraduates interested in teaching careers generally demonstrated attitudes toward free flow of information comparable to subjects described in earlier studies. As with their earlier counterparts, the students surveyed in this study demonstrated support for unrestricted flow of information in some circumstances while favoring restricting information flow in other circumstances. While all seem to hold dear the principles of free expression proposed in the Constitution, ambiguity concerning the absolute defense of the First Amendment was clearly evident.

The most prevalent attitudes supporting suppression of information flow appeared to occur concerning the rights of producers to make information in a variety of forms available to children. Respondents, for example, expressed support for restricting pornography, information on joining the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi organizations, and how to commit criminal acts. However, respondents differed by sex, age, and race relative to what they perceived as harmful to children. Respondents were generally in agreement with U.S. federal courts who determined that children were exempt from first amendment coverage concerning information potentially harmful to them. Important court cases include: Becknell v. Vergennes Union High School (1979); Pico v. Board of Education, Island Trees (1979); and Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier (1988).

The subjects, many of whom will likely be teaching, will undoubtedly have many opportunities on a daily basis, to restrict their own student's access to many forms and types of information. Simple observation of the data indicates that few would be the

least bit hesitant to restrict information personally offensive to them. The question: "How are personal attitudes toward information flow reflected in action in the day-to-day operation of classrooms in particular and schools in general?" invites serious study.

The findings might cause some discomfort among teacher leaders and professors preparing the teachers of tomorrow. Teachers, especially those in the middle and secondary school, are expected to pass on to their students a respect for the American tradition of freedom of expression. On the other hand, many of these individuals who are likely to lead children in the future, also, maintain strong reservations concerning proliferation of material they find personally offensive.

As data revealed, perceptions concerning restricting information flow differed substantially in some areas based on sex, age, and race. The very genesis of education, on the other hand, involves inquiry and exploration of all areas of study from the mundane to the highly volatile and controversial. Perhaps teacher educators would be well advised to

discuss specific issues such as those presented in the survey and, also, general principles concerning freedom of expression. Teachers in colleges preparing future teachers can help their students develop tolerance of others' perspectives and determine how differences can be respected under the umbrella of free speech.

Analysis of data presented herein suggests that issues must be explored from many perspectives. Failing this, students might well continue believing that education is primarily a process for obtaining objective, factual knowledge. The perceived need to protect individuals, especially the young, from information deemed inappropriate or harmful appears to be very strong. On the other hand, so is the need for free expression. In closing, the words of A.M. Rosenthal, cited by Kister (1989) seem apropos; "The passion for freedom of the mind is strong and everlasting, which is fortunate, because so is the passion to squelch it." (P.29)

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Table 1

Percent of Respondents within the Total Sample Favoring Free Flow of Information (n=1,347)

	Item	Total
1.	Clergy (ministers, priests, rabbis, etc.) have the right to remove offensive materials from schools.**	.91
2.	School libraries should have books by Karl Marx and other communist writers for students to borrow.	.88
3.	Students should be allowed to read and view materials that school administrators may believe are objectional.	.78
4.	The publication of pornography should be illegal, and anyone doing so should be punished.**	.36
5.	Public school teachers should refrain from providing information on human sexuality to children under 14 years of age.**	.93
6.	Advertisements for memberships in the Ku Klux Klan should be permitted in school newspapers.	.08
7.	Pornographic materials should be banned from all school libraries.**	.17
8.	Public school libraries should have information about drug use and abuse available to children under 14 years of age.	.97
9.	Students should be allowed to publish articles in public school newspapers even though teachers may object to the content.	.78

10.	Information sources which describe how to commit criminal acts should be banned.**	.23
11.	It should be illegal for the rock group, "Dead Kennedys" to use the Kennedy name in this way.**	.78
12.	Parents should allow teenagers to read about lifestyles radically different from those of their parents.	.96
13.	Children learn right from wrong by being exposed to a variety of religious and ethical views.	.76
14.	Record albums with pictures of mutilated human bodies should be banned.**	.38
15.	Information declaring United States involvement in the Viet Nam War as immoral should be available in libraries.	.81
16.	Playboy and Playgirl magazines should be available in secondary school library magazine collections.	.03
17.	Young people should be protected from information presenting homosexuality as an acceptable identity.**	.60
18.	An autobiography of a person with AIDS should be available in school libraries.	.96
19.	Stories about people who feel positive toward communist governments in other countries should be available in school libraries.	.86
20.	School administrators should inform teachers and students never to use words in the classroom that offend Christians.**	.46

21.	The United States government should classify information giving details of how aid was given to the Nicaraguan Contras.**	.47
22.	The word "Nigger" is used repeatedly in "Huckleberry Finn, and therefore the book should be banned from school libraries.**	.98
23.	Television channels, such as MTV, should be subject to a panel of concerned citizens who may select which videos are suitable for broadcast.**	.76
24.	No school library should purchase materials with taxpayers' money which promote the Muslim religion among African-American children.**	.80
25.	Information about how to join the American Nazi Party should be available in school newspapers.	.10
26.	The U.S. government should limit public information about the dangers of the "greenhouse effect."**	.93
27.	Khomeini was right when he threatened the life of Salman Rushdie for writing "The Satanic Verses".**	.90
28.	Stories about women who willingly choose to have abortions should be presented on television.	.67
29.	The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) is to be congratulated for establishing a department to regulate sexual stereotypes in programming.**	.11
30.	Burning the flag of the United States is an acceptable form of protest.	.15

31.	Schools should remove materials which are accepting of the ancient Eskimo practice of abandoning the elderly to die on ice floes.**	.86
32.	Newspapers were correct in refusing to publish the Doonesbury comic strip when it portrayed a character with AIDS joking about his condition.**	.62
33.	Public school libraries should refrain from purchasing materials which use slang to describe sexual acts.**	.45
34.	Local courts should have the authority to determine whether a book violates community moral standards, and therefore, should be banned.**	.75

Table 2

Percent of Respondents Favoring Free Flow of Information by Respondent Characteristics

	Gender		Race		Age		Grade Level	
Item	Male (200)	Female (1144)	White (1131)	Black (165)	Under 30 (1099)	30 and above (245)	K-6 (970)	7-12 (271)
1	.89	.92	.92	.87*	.92	.91	.91	.89
2	.93	.82*	.89	.90	.89	.85	.87	.93
3	.75	.78	.77	.80	.79	.70	.77	.79
4	.62	.31*	.36	.42	.36	.35	.32	.47*
5	.86	.94*	.93	.91	.93	.90	.94	.90
6	.13	.07*	.08	.08	.07	.12*	.07	.10
7	.27	.15*	.15	.23*	.17	.12	.15	.19
8	.98	.97	.97	.93*	.97	.97	.97	.98
9	.80	.78	.78	.78	.79	.74	.76	.82
10	.35	.21	.22	.26	.23	.21	.22	.27
11	.78	.78	.80	.65*	.79	.74	.77	.80
12	.96	.96	.96	.95	.91	.96*	.95	.97
13	.74	.77	.75	.85*	.78	.68*	.76	.77
14	.53	.36*	.37	.45	.40	.30*	.35	.46
15	.81	.81	.82	.79	.80	.81	.79	.84
16	.13	.02*	.03	.06	.03	.04	.03	.06*
17	.41	.63*	.61	.53	.61	.53*	.61	.54
18	.96	.96	.97	.93*	.97	.91*	.96	.96
19	.88	.85	.87	.78*	.87	.81*	.84	.90
20	.50	.45	.48	.36*	.44	.53*	.46	.47
21	.48	.46	.48	.35*	.45	.55*	.45	.52

*p<.05

Table 2 (Continued)

Percent of Respondents Favoring Free Flow of Information by Characteristics

	Gender		Race		Age		Grade Level	
Item	Male (200)	Female (1144)	White (1131)	Black (165)	Under 30 (1099)	30 and above (245)	K-6 (970)	7-12 (271)
22	.93	.97*	.98	.87*	.97	.97	.97	.96
23	.79	.75	.77	.72	.78	.65*	.75	.76
24	.74	.81	.80	.82	.83	.68*	.82	.71*
25	.16	.09*	.10	.13	.10	.10	.09	.15*
26	.91	.94	.94	.87*	.93	.96	.93	.93
27	.89	.89	.91	.81*	.87	.97*	.89	.91
28	.65	.67*	.68	.63*	.68	.59*	.65	.71
29	.20	.09*	.10	.20*	.10	.13	.10	.13
30	.23	.13	.14	.24*	.13	.22*	.12	.22*
31	.88	.86	.88	.74*	.85	.93*	.87	.84
32	.71	.60*	.64	.48*	.61	.66	.60	.65
33	.57	.43*	.45	.48	.46	.41	.44	.48
34	.68	.75	.76	.61*	.75	.72	.75	.74

*p<.05